



Peabody West Integrated Resource Project



Decision Notice

Peabody West Integrated Resource Project

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

White Mountain National Forest, Androscoggin Ranger District

Coos County, NH

The Decision Notice incorporates all previous information in the Peabody West Integrated Resource Project Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact (EA/FONSI), as well as information included in the project record.

Decision and Rationale

I have decided to approve the activities described in the “Purpose and Need” and “Proposed Action” sections of the project EA/FONSI, including modifications identified during environmental analysis and review of legal and regulatory compliance.

Under the proposed action, management actions will occur within approximately 3,000 acres of management area (MA) 2.1 (General Forest Management) lands. The purpose of this management area is to provide a sustained yield of high-quality timber products; provide a balanced mix of habitats for wildlife; provide a variety of recreation opportunities; and manage high-use or highly developed recreation areas to acceptable social and ecological standards while retaining some low-use and less developed areas.

The project will advance Forest Plan goals and objectives by providing high quality timber products, diversifying wildlife habitat, and addressing other recreation and transportation management needs. Refer to the EA/FONSI for a complete project description; the proposed action is summarized below.

- Conduct silvicultural treatment on about 2,220 acres of Management Area 2.1 lands within the Peabody West habitat management unit (HMU)
- Expand a permanent wildlife opening to about 19 total acres
- Construct about 0.6 mile of new road to replace a 0.8 mile decommissioned portion of Forest Road 263 (Libby South) and Forest Road 264 (Jackknife)
- Reconstruct about 9 miles of existing system and non-system roads
- Add about 3 miles of unauthorized roads to the forest road system
- Designate about 6 miles of mountain biking trail as part of the forest trail system, including constructing about 4 miles of new single- and double-track trail on National Forest System land
- Designate about 300 acres as a backcountry ski zone with up to 5 skiable downhill routes
- Grade and tread-harden trail access to the Third Hole swimming site
- Thin vegetation within a 3 acre area at the Androscoggin Ranger District office

Applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines, national core and state best management practices, and project-specific design features identified by the interdisciplinary team will be implemented as part of the proposed action (EA, pp. 15-17). Acreage prescriptions for units 19 and 20 and a single wildlife opening exceed Forest Plan Guidelines G-3 for scenery management in MA 2.1 lands (Forest Plan p. 3-6). These units provide key opportunities to move the forest toward desired conditions for regeneration habitat as discussed in the Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action (EA, p.3) and in the HMU rationale document. Because the Forest Plan permits flexibility regarding guidelines (Forest Plan, p.2-3), this project is consistent with Forest Plan guidance and therefore a Forest Plan amendment is not required.



Peabody West Integrated Resource Project



I have considered the best available science in making this decision. An interdisciplinary team fully evaluated and disclosed the environmental effects of the proposed project based on field study, resource inventory and survey, the best available science, and professional expertise. The project record demonstrates a thorough review of relevant scientific information and the consideration of opposing views. I considered the need for action and the issues identified during scoping and the public comment process in making my decision. I weighed the effects of the proposed action against taking no action. While taking no action would allow natural successional processes to continue, it would not advance the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. Therefore, taking no action would not meet the need for the project. The proposed action will have minimal impact on the environment and will benefit multiple resources.

Summary of Public Involvement

The EA (p. 31) describes the public involvement process including the list of agencies, organizations, and persons consulted regarding this project.

We first introduced the project to the public in March 2019. The conceptual project was published on the Forest Service's schedule of proposed actions (SOPA) in April 2019, and a proposal development open house was held with the public on April 9, 2019.

In December 2019, we initiated a scoping comment period for the Peabody West Project. A notice of the availability of the scoping newsletter and request for comments was sent to over 450 parties and published in the Berlin Sun. Based on public input gathered during this initial comment period, and additional interdisciplinary review, we modified the scope of the proposed project, primarily the recreation components. We then held an additional scoping comment period to present the updated proposal in March 2021. Notice of this additional scoping comment period was sent to over 650 parties. In August 2022, we initiated the formal 30-day comment period on the draft EA and preliminary FONSI for the project. A notice of the availability of the draft EA/FONSI was published in the New Hampshire Union Leader and the Berlin Sun. In addition, we sent notice of this comment period to over 560 parties. On August 16, 2022, we held a virtual public meeting to provide an overview of the project and assist the public with the comment process. The virtual public meeting included an open question-and-answer session with public.

Over the course of the analysis process, we received 68 unique comment letters, all of which have been reviewed by the interdisciplinary team and are saved in the project record. The interdisciplinary team and responsible official considered all comments received and used them to help refine and modify the proposed action, make factual corrections and updates, and adjust the analysis and supporting documentation for clarity.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision is consistent with the Biological Opinion issued on March 31, 2023, by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the management of northern long-eared bats. All reasonable and prudent measures and terms and conditions listed in the Biological Opinion will be adhered to during project implementation.

The Biological Evaluation determined that the proposed actions would not jeopardize the continued existence of tricolored bats, which were proposed for listing by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service on September 14, 2022. When the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service finalizes the proposed rule to list the tricolored bat as endangered, the White Mountain National Forest will initiate consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service on all project activities to comply with Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act.

My decision complies with other law, regulation, and policy applicable to the proposal as documented in the EA (pp. 23-31) and finding of no significant impact.



Peabody West Integrated Resource Project



Implementation

Pursuant to regulations found at 36 CFR 218.12, the responsible official may not sign the decision notice until the reviewing officer has responded in writing to all pending objections. If no objections are received, the responsible official may sign the decision notice five (5) business days after expiration of the opportunity to object. Implementation may begin immediately after the decision notice is signed. Implementation of the project is expected to begin in fall 2024.

Administrative Review and Objection Opportunities

This decision was subject to the pre-decisional objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Only individuals or organizations who submitted timely and specific written comments (section 218.2) about this project during designated opportunities for public comment are eligible to file an objection in accordance with section 218.5. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after designated comment opportunities (section 218.8(c)). The burden is on the objector to demonstrate compliance with this requirement. The objection must contain the minimum content requirements specified in section 218.8(d). Incorporation of documents by reference is permitted only as provided in section 218.8(b).

The opportunity to object ends 45 days following the date of publication of the legal notice in the newspaper of record, the New Hampshire Union Leader. Written objections must be postmarked during this time period and received within 5 business days after this time period. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection, and those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The 45-day period is computed using calendar days, including Saturdays, Sundays, and federal holidays. When the period expires on a Saturday, Sunday, or federal holiday, the time is extended to the end of the next federal working day. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period. It is the objector's responsibility to ensure timely filing of a written objection with the reviewing officer. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process. Names and contact information submitted with objections will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act. A legal notice was published in the Manchester Union Leader and the Berlin Sun on April 27, 2023. The objection filing period closed on June 12, 2023. One objection was received. The Reviewing Officer, WMNF Forest Supervisor Derek Ibarguen, issued an objection response letter on October 18, 2023. All instructions issued by the Reviewing Officer in his objection response letter have been addressed.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Joshua Sjostrom, District Ranger, by email at joshua.sjostrom@usda.gov or by phone at 603-446-2713 extension 1210.

Thank you for your interest in the management of the White Mountain National Forest.

Joshua Sjostrom

Androscoggin District Ranger